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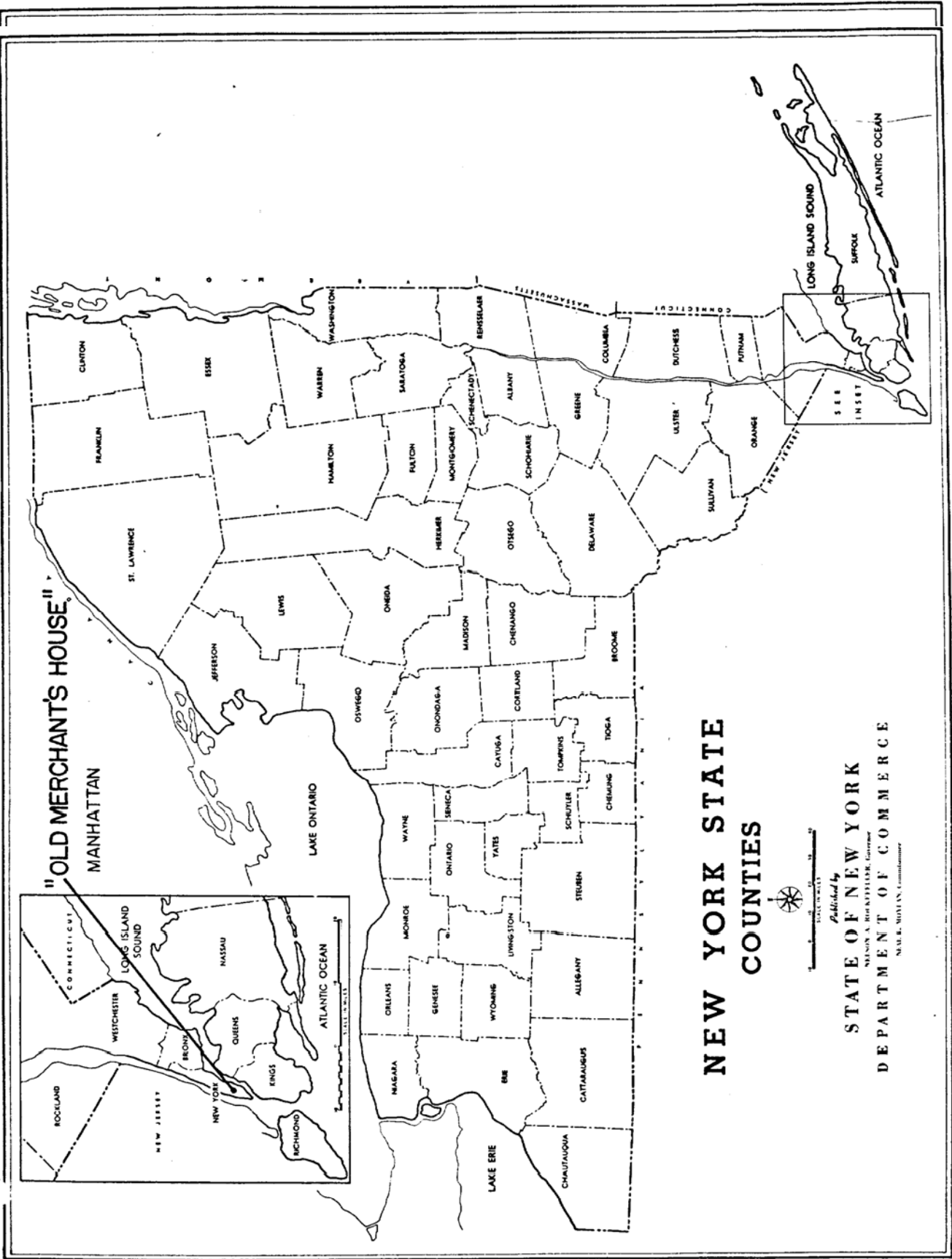
A REPORT ON

Seabury Treadwell ("Old Merchant's") House
New York, N. Y.

Prepared by the

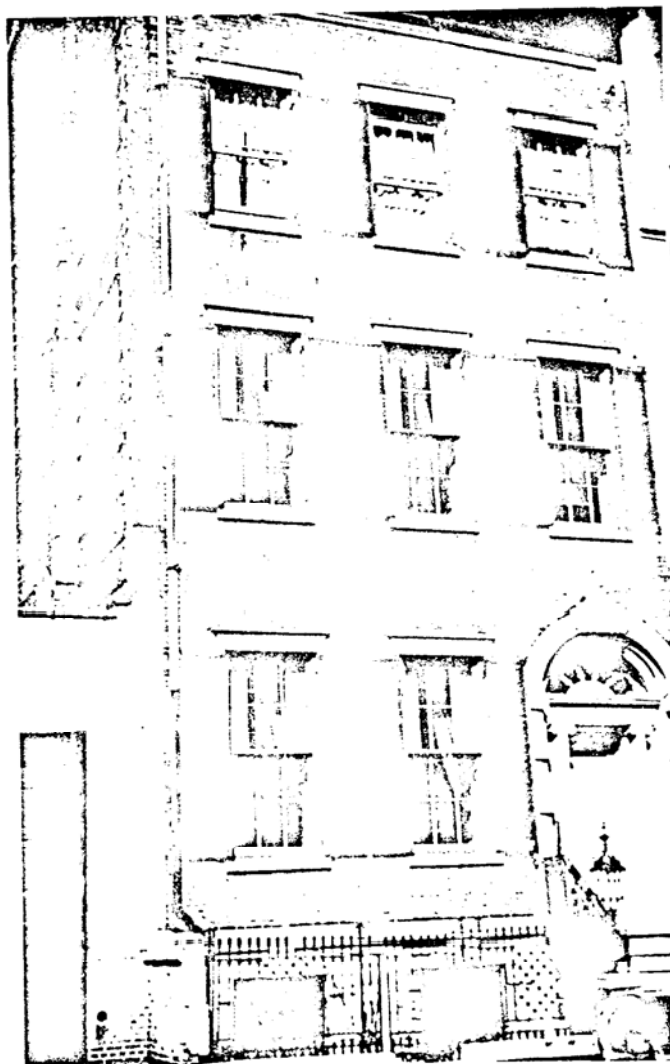
NEW YORK STATE HISTORIC TRUST STAFF

April 1971

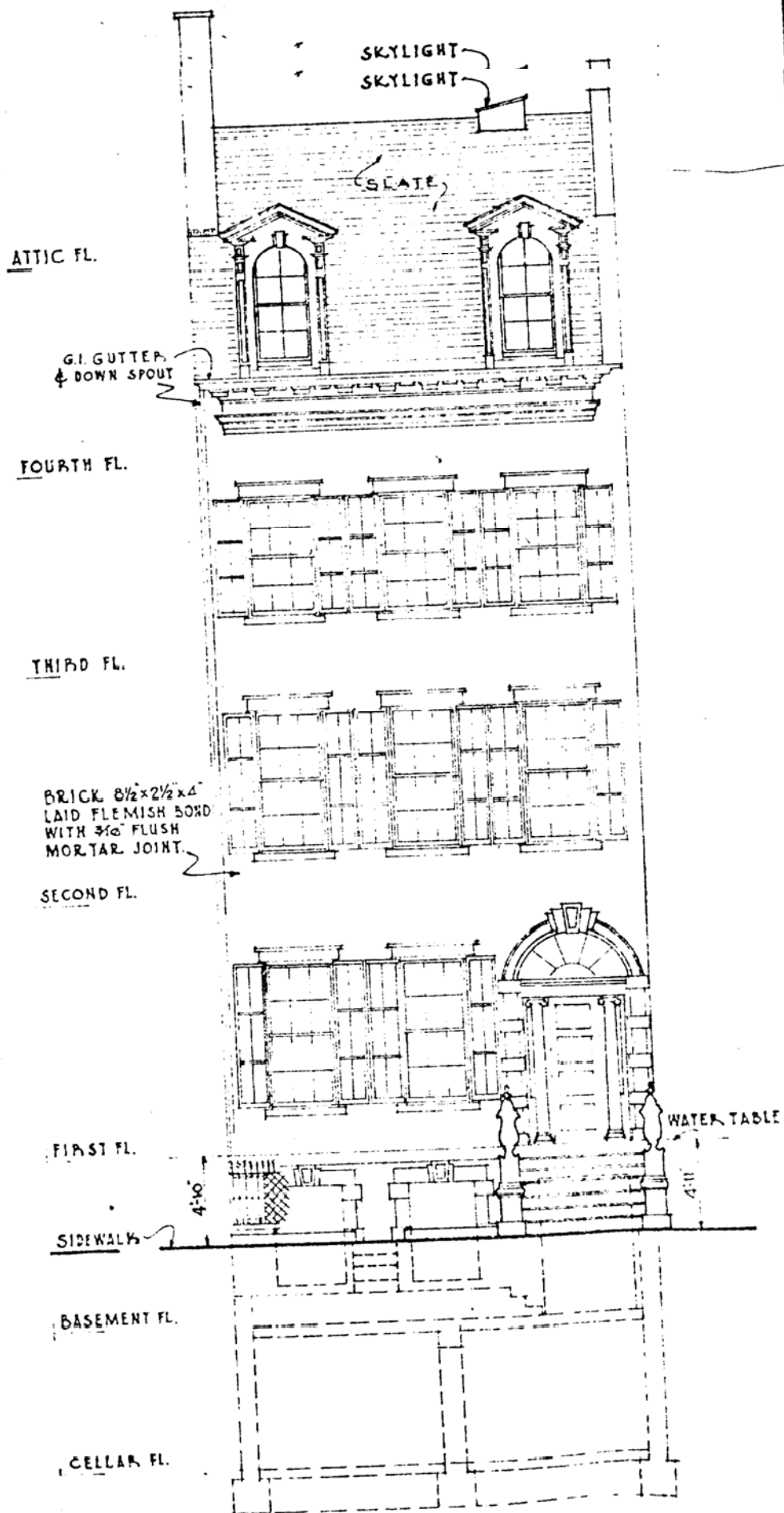


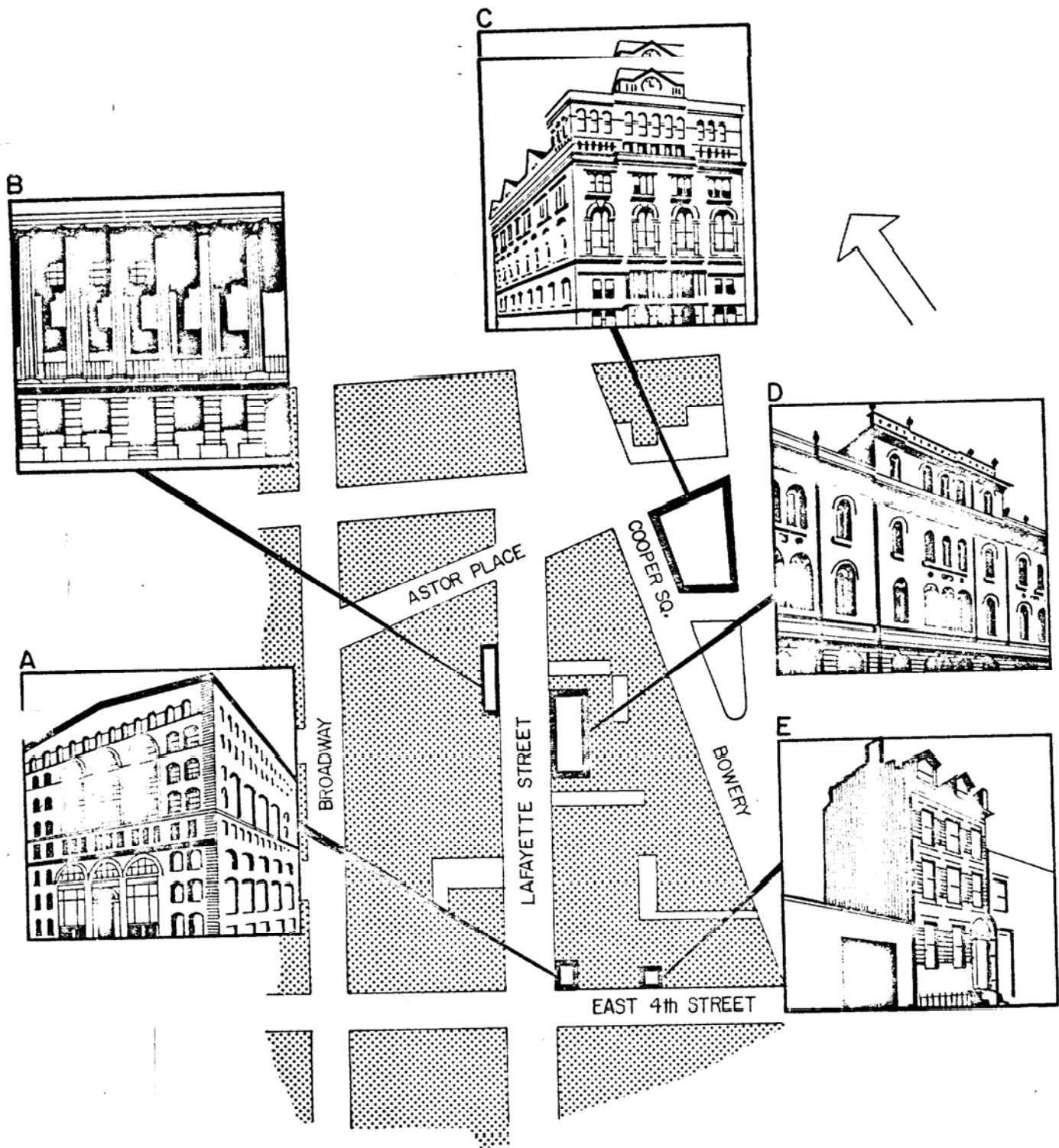
HOUSES WITH GRECIAN GRACES

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SEABURY TREDWELL HOUSE





- A DeVINNE PRESS BUILDING
- B COLONNADE ROW
- C COOPER UNION
- D OLD ASTOR LIBRARY
- E SEABURY TREDWELL HOUSE (OLD MERCHANT'S HOUSE)

SEABURY TREDWELL ("OLD MERCHANT'S") HOUSE

New York

INTRODUCTION

The Seabury Tredwell House, also known as the Old Merchant's House, located in Manhattan, is presently owned by the Historic Landmark Society. The sole purpose of this organization is the preservation of this house and its collection of original materials contained therein.

On February 4, 1971, Messrs. Harmon H. Goldstone, Chairman of the New York City Landmarks Commission, and Geoffrey Platt, former Chairman and Vice Chairman of that organization and a member of the Executive Council of the Historic Landmark Society wrote Mr. Pell recommending that the New York State Historic Trust assume ownership of the Old Merchant's House and that it undertake to restore the structure and furnishings and maintain it as a Historic Site. The property and its collection would be transferred at no cost to the Trust.

LOCATION AND APPEARANCE

The Old Merchant's House is a Registered National Historic Landmark. It is located at 29 East 4th Street, in the Borough of Manhattan, New York City, on the north side of the street between Lafayette Street and the Bowery. While the immediate area is a commercial neighborhood consisting of business lofts, and the narrow street is crowded with trucks during the day, some places on East 4th Street are used as dwellings. Ada Louise Huxtable describes the site as being on "the fringe of the old-bum-and-broken-bottle territory," but the Bowery is being transformed into an area of artists' studios.

To the east of No. 29 are three buildings similar to the original appearance of the Old Merchant's House but are now only two stories high.

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The fourth house to the east is a Greek Revival row house, which is pretty much intact in the exterior. The fifth house, towards the Bowery, is a five-story high Victorian which dates from the latter part of the 19th century.

In the immediate vicinity is a concentration of distinguished structures that stamps the neighborhood with a unique quality. On the northeast corner of East 4th and Lafayette Streets is 399 Lafayette Street, formerly known as the DeVinne Press Building (1885), described as "a powerful brick building in the utilitarian manner of the late 19th century industrial buildings." Up the block, on the same side of Lafayette Street, is the New York Shakespeare Festival Theater, now apparently called the Public Theater and formerly known as the Astor Library. Almost facing the theater structure are the four remaining portions of a "Colonnade Row" of nine houses, originally called "LaGrange Terrace." When constructed in 1831, they were considered "the finest row of private dwellings in the city." On an adjoining block to the east, at Cooper Square, Astor Place and East 6th Street, stands Cooper Union (1859), the famous institution for free education "for the advancement of science and art." The latter is also a Registered National Historic Landmark, and all of these sites have also received the designation of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission.

The red brick Old Merchant's House measures about 25 feet 6 inches wide by 54 feet deep by approximately 50 feet high and has six levels--cellar, basement, three main living floors and an attic under the gable roof. It is three bays across with windows with limestone lintels and wood shutters. The conspicuous entrance has fan light, keystone, and Ionic side columns and is fronted by delicate cast and wrought iron baluster, railings, newel post and fence. The rear of the late Federal style structure with Greek

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Revival features is not finished with the same fine features as the front. In the rear were the water closet, cistern and family garden. Research has indicated that there was no carriage house.

When HABS surveyed the site in 1936, the evaluation of its condition was "excellent." But the lack of adequate maintenance over the past 35 years has seriously affected the house so that it now requires major repair work. Exterior walls require repainting and stabilization and the roof is in a serious state of deterioration. Interior walls, ceilings and decorative elements all demand considerable attention. (Attached is a schedule of repairs and costs.)

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The property that became 29 East 4th Street had passed through many hands and transactions from the time when it was originally a portion of the Wouter Van Twiller Patent, which Peter Stuyvesant subsequently divided into 13 parcels. The transaction of immediate interest came in June 1831 when Joseph Brewster acquired the lot from Ann Warner for \$3550. Soon after, during 1831 and 1832, Brewster, a hatter, had built the future Old Merchant's House. In 1835, Seabury Tredwell, a retired hardware merchant, purchased the dwelling that remained in the family for the next 98 years.

Tredwell had been born on Long Island in 1780, the son of a Loyalist physician and a mother whose half brother was Samuel Seabury, the first Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America. His first appearance in the New York City directory was in 1804 when he was listed as a hardware merchant on Pearl Street and residing a short distance away. In 1813-1814, he formed a partnership with his cousin, Joseph Kissam, and the firm of Tredwell, Kissam and Company came into existence. The firm profited and Tredwell used his assets to invest in other business activities, especially in loans and city real estate.

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When 40 years old, in 1820, Tredwell married Elizabeth Earl Parker. After the birth of their first daughter a year later, they moved to 12 Dey Street, which Tredwell purchased for \$6000. With the birth of a seventh child, in May 1835, the Tredwells moved uptown to the then more fashionable neighborhood of East 4th Street and purchased Brewster's handsome dwelling. There the eighth and last child, Gertrude Ellsworth, was born in 1840. A further indication of the level of Tredwell's prosperity and standard of living was his purchase in 1832 of a 600 acre summer estate in Rumson, New Jersey. He enlarged this holding the next year by the purchase of a 150 acre adjoining plot.

The year 1835 represented another notable turning point for the 55-year old Tredwell when, in that year, the firm of Tredwell, Kissam and Company was dissolved and Tredwell retired from active business life. He spent his time investing his profits in loans and in the stock market. At the time of his death in 1865, his estate amounted to more than \$120,000.

Tredwell is an outstanding example of the prosperous, self-made man. He succeeded in business with great help from the expanding levels of business activity. New York City in the years following the end of the War of 1812 must have resembled a "boom town" when "modern" structures replaced colonial edifices. The combination of well-known events and developments centering around the superb natural harbor, climaxed, in October 1825, with the opening of the Erie Canal, ushered in a period of unprecedented prosperity. Tredwell was in a position to profit from these developments. The Old Merchant's House survives as a reminder of the bustling period that assured the city's position of commercial supremacy.

The Old Merchant's House has survived only as a result of good fortune. Following Tredwell's death, his estate was the subject of extensive litigation. It is unnecessary to print details here, except to state that

the youngest daughter, Gertrude Ellsworth Tredwell, acquired 29 East 4th Street. She lived there until her death in 1933 at age 93 and had spent the last 24 years of her life faced with the sole responsibility of keeping up the property. The city changed enormously during her long life but the exterior and the interior of her home, with its original decor and family furnishings, remained much as it had been during the time of her father's residence.

After the death of the last of the original occupants, the house and contents were about to be put up for sale to pay off the debts and the mortgages on the site. In a last minute action, the Old Merchant's House was saved through the interest of a great grandson who persuaded a great nephew of Tredwell's to purchase and preserve the site. As a result, the Historic Landmark Society came into existence and in 1935 opened the Old Merchant's House to the public.

The chief association of the Old Merchant's House is with Seabury Tredwell who seems not to have made an impression on the political or cultural life of the city; even his role in economic pursuits would be easily forgotten without the tangible evidence of his life and accomplishments remaining at 29 East 4th Street. There, in its unchanged condition, is one of "the city's finest landmarks of the period" when New York City was establishing itself as the foremost center for domestic commerce and international trade. Obvious relations exist between Old Merchant's House and the significance of Schermerhorn Row, and the former site also ties in closely with the variety of developments occurring at Schoharie Crossing.

It is not necessary to comment on the rather complex questions of the architect of the Old Merchant's House save to indicate that many details of the site resemble those published in builders' guides that Minard Lafever prepared and published. Well-preserved, with much of its original fabric

intact, the Old Merchant's House provides, "with unrivaled authenticity," an opportunity to observe "how a prosperous merchant of the 1830's lived." It has further been described as "a unique survival in the City of New York," and "the preservation of the house with its contents is of the utmost importance for both historical and aesthetic reasons."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposal that the New York State Historic Trust accept the Old Merchant's House and operate it as a historic site is entirely justified. The site is indicative of an important historical life style and architectural mode. It represents an extremely valuable resource that has to be preserved. The superlative qualities of the site warrant its preservation, and its unique features would make it an outstanding addition to the State system.

The New York State Historic Trust, however, must be aware of the acute pressures working against New York State acquisition. The impelling reason of course, is financial. The Trust simply lacks the capital funds to do what must be done.

One source of financing essential repairs is the emergency grant-in-aid program of the Department of the Interior for properties on the National Register which are threatened or are in imminent danger of destruction. The Old Merchant's House certainly qualifies.

Desirable as preservation of the Old Merchant's House may be, it cannot be considered apart from the surroundings. Mention has already been made of the important buildings on East 4th Street as well as the outstanding quartet in the vicinity. The New York State Historic Trust has approved a grant for restoration of the Shakespeare Festival (Public) Theater and now must consider a future for an equally deserving site in the same block. This area warrants a comprehensive preservation plan

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that will safeguard and ensure the future of these historic and architectural resources as well as upgrade and develop, for viable uses, the other worthwhile structures in the area. The New York State Historic Trust should encourage New York City to consider the unique opportunities offered. (The land use maps of the New York City Master Plan of 1969, however, appears to indicate that suitable uses for this area would be as a "central business district" and for "light industry" along with a "high residential" use area to the east in the East Village.)

The staff recommends that immediate efforts be made to obtain emergency Federal grant-in-aid funds for essential repairs.

The Historic Landmark Society should be asked to initiate a fund-raising drive for the purpose of undertaking emergency repairs. The aim should be to make the structure weathertight and stable. A recognizable fund-raising goal would be \$30,000 to match the Federal grant.

If the fiscal climate and the Trust situation improves in the near future, serious consideration should be given to acceptance of the property on a top priority basis. Acceptance of the property as a gift at this time is not recommended.